THE REPUTATION OF VOLTAIRE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE (1840-1870)

BY

GEORGE LOUIS PLAYE

A.B., Brown University, 1939
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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

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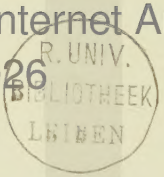

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THE REPUTATION OF VOLTAIRE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE (1840-1870)

Voltaire, during his lifetime, was the center of many controversies which arose from his writings and from various events in his life. These controversies raged through many countries where citizens and leaders alike often became involved in the debates touched off by Voltaire. The man and his work had become engaged in conflict early in his career. His death saw no cessation of the feuds engendered by Voltaire, the man, and Voltaire, the author. The battle over Voltaire has waxed and waned during the 170 years since his death; never, however, has it ceased.

This study is an attempt to survey the battle over Voltaire in France from 1840 to 1870. The reactions to Voltaire were studied to show the nature of the various writings on Voltaire. These were examined in an effort to determine the evolution of the Voltaire discussions. The period studied was selected because it best demonstrates the transition in the motives and methods for discussing the eighteenth-century Patriarch. During the three decades under consideration, France was directed by three different types of government and was approaching a fourth. The acute problems of conflict between Church and State were continuously debated during these years. The Academy contest on Voltaire (1844) and the campaign to erect a statue to his memory (1867-1870) correspond roughly to the beginning and the end of the period studied here. Moreover, 1840 marks the publication of Victor Hugo's *Regard jeté dans une mansarde,* perhaps the best known poetical attack on Voltaire, while the period 1867-1870 marks, with the work of Desnoiresterres, the culmination of nineteenth-century scholarship as applied to the criticism of Voltaire prior to the Franco-Prussian War.

In order to make the survey as proposed, it was necessary

to examine the issues at stake. What rôle did contemporary political events play in the discussions directed at Voltaire? Were the discussions directed at Voltaire's work, at his legacy to literature, at his successors, at Voltaire the man, or simply at the name Voltaire? These were questions for which we sought answers as we undertook our investigation.

We were preceded in the general field by one study, a Hungarian thesis devoted to the reactions of nineteenth-century representative French writers to Voltaire. The author, Zsuzsanna Halasz (*Voltaire aXIX szaszad itelleteben,* Budapest, Bethlen, 1934), for the purposes of her thesis, had no recourse to the works of writers of secondary rank, nor did she display any concern with the reactions of journalists, reviewers, memoir writers, etc. to Voltaire. Moreover, since she was interested only in main currents of Voltaire criticism, she discussed a whole century of writers in the course of a relatively short dissertation (135 pages). She made no attempt to discover a chronological pattern of reactions, and, in many cases, she was content to accept the conclusions of later writers who had discussed the nineteenth-century writers in whose reactions she was interested.

Relying on works that dealt primarily with Voltaire, we included in our study the pronouncements of nineteenth-century biographers, littérateurs, and intellectuals. We included memoirs, letters, articles, and reviews where these evaluated either Voltaire or recent discussions of him and his work. The items potentially included in our plan are numberless, and consequently we can make no claim to completeness. We have endeavored to examine a representative body of material; where important documents were unavailable, we turned to secondary material in order to show the views expressed in the originals. In any event, this treatise is an attempt to give a systematic picture of the main discussions provoked by Voltaire in the three decades following 1840. Where possible the chronology of the writings was observed in our exposition. Generally, we introduced material according to dates of publication; in a few instances, however, we

have discussed items in accordance with their dates of composition, especially when a delay in publication rendered particular items meaningless for our study if considered solely in relation to dates of publication.

Despite Renan's statement to the contrary, a definition of *voltairien* and *voltairianisme* is difficult. It was our experience that the concept of these terms varied from author to author. Generally *voltairien,* and consequently *voltairianisme,* was seen to have had at least six common connotations in the period studied. Its most widely accepted meaning was one which denoted a spirit of opposition to the Church; even within this definition, however, there were several different concepts ranging from opposition to religious fanatics to disbelief in the existence of God. A second interpretation of the term was one which would define *voltairien* as reflecting the spirit of Voltaire, accepting the eighteenth-century crusader as a symbol of universal liberalism. A third usage suggested the quality of being affected or influenced by the results, direct or indirect, of the work of Voltaire. A fourth usage accepted *voltairien* as meaning sympathetic toward Voltaire, and in a fifth instance it was found to mean merely related to Voltaire. A still further application of the term was reserved for writers who carried on in the tradition of Voltaire. With such diverse application of the expression, it is readily seen that there was possible a multiplicity of interpretation, especially because a changing explanation of the significance of the man inevitably led to disagreement in the use and acceptation of the term. Throughout the period under study, the term often had a derogatory implication, hence writers rarely applied the term to themselves. In our dissertation, we have taken Voltairian generally to signify "relating to Voltaire," except where authors under discussion had applied the word otherwise to satisfy their own implied definitions.

In the period which we studied, Voltaire's reputation was seen to have been considerably influenced by the passing crises of any given moment in history. These crises were usually of a political nature, with religious and philosophic

questions as by-products. Voltaire's name came into contention between clashing personalities, and it became a symbol to be exploited in support of prejudices and interests. In justifying the symbol, it was inevitable that men would further study Voltaire in order to define better the things for which he stood. In debates which had contemporary implications, seldom did we find Voltaire's literary merit to have been judged *per se*, except incidentally.

Prominent writers of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century had published verdicts for or against Voltaire and had left a large body of material upon which later writers could draw for authority. Among the pre-1840 writings, we have discussed specifically the documents which became important in the discussions during the years 1840-1870. Chief among the names representing early anti-Voltairian sentiments were Chateaubriand, Mme de Staël, and Joseph de Maistre. The latter's pronouncement against Voltaire was probably the most often re-echoed, but Chateaubriand's and Mme de Staël's judgments carried the prestige of their rank in literary history and were therefore important to later writers. Victor Cousin's influence over writers and philosophers of his period made his denunciation of Voltaire's philosophy significant during the entire period studied. The writers of the Romantic period, separated from Voltaire by ideological walls, found ample grounds for criticizing him, and, though some of them — notably Victor Hugo and Lamartine — later reversed their decisions, they were often cited by writers desiring to attack Voltaire.

Among the significant writings sympathetic towards Voltaire before 1840 were those of Condorcet and J.-M. Chénier. The work of both men influenced later pro-Voltairians, Condorcet's *Vie de Voltaire* becoming a standard reference for the facts of Voltaire's life. Although Comte was not in complete sympathy with Voltaire's philosophy, his judgment of Voltaire was sufficiently favorable so that one can see his influence on some of his disciples who wrote in favor of the *philosophe*.

In the pre-1840 period two writers, Barante and Villemain, were considered to be impartial in their evaluations of Voltaire. Despite alleged impartiality, Barante could be considered by later writers as antipathetic and Villemain as sympathetic towards Voltaire. The method of these two men was probably more important than their judgments, as writers like Charles Nisard, Rigault, Saint-Marc Girardin, and even Sainte-Beuve wrote about Voltaire in the tradition which they pioneered.

In the period 1840-1870, the Villemain Law in 1841, giving control of secondary education to the University, precipitated a clash of University and Church interests, and Voltaire's name crept in as a banner representing all that was right and good for the one side, as a cursed symbol of anti-clericalism for the other side. Shortly thereafter, in 1844, the Academy contest, which offered prizes for essays dealing with Voltaire, kept alive the bitterness of the contending parties. The University group found allies in the men whose basic philosophies were in agreement with Voltaire's; the Church supporters were aided by the systematic philosophers who opposed Voltaire's negativistic and amorphous philosophy. During these earlier controversies, little or no attempt was made to examine the factual bases of the arguments. Eloquence, fortified by earlier judgments, was the first requisite.

In the University-clergy conflict, Michelet and Quinet were leaders of the group representing the University and influential journals of the day supported them. Montalembert, Dupanloup, Falloux, Veuillot and other leading Catholics vigorously opposed the men who identified the University cause with that of Voltaire. Cousin and his colleagues joined forces with the Catholics in opposing any move to popularize Voltaire.

When the Voltaire contest in the Academy prolonged the dispute started by the Villemain Law, Quinet and Michelet found partisans in Harel, Baudrillart, and Bordas-Demoulin, all of whom wrote favorably about Voltaire. Romain-Cornut, writing for the same competition, made his debut as a violent

anti-Voltairian. It is interesting to note that all the essays crowned or mentioned by the Academy were written in favor of Voltaire.

Voltaire's name continued to be discussed as the quarrel started in 1841 continued. Quinet and Michelet went on writing and lecturing in support of Voltaire — their Voltairian writings taking on the form of an indirect protest against the government in the late stages of the Louis-Philippe regime. Veuillot emerged as the writer with the greatest hatred for Voltaire during this period, and he found a strong ally in Romain-Cornut. Writing with no special interest in the University-clergy struggle or in political events, Ernest Bersot wrote an impressive defense of Voltaire in 1848.

Interest in Voltaire was kept alive by the political crises of changing regimes and of subsequent periods of government instability. Once Louis-Napoleon had rigid control of the government, the men who claimed to represent the Church, hopeful of definite support from the Emperor, sought to gain permanent advantage over groups allegedly inspired by Voltaire. The challenge was accepted, and Voltaire's name remained in public view, thanks to the violence of the debates and the prominence of the debaters.

During the Second Republic, writings on Voltaire had shown a growing interest in establishing and discussing the facts of Voltaire's life. Whether in favor of or opposed to Voltaire, writers displayed an increasing concern for presenting documentary evidence — usually letters — in support of their statements. The same tendencies continued during the early years of the Second Empire. *Le Siècle* opposed Veuillot's *Univers* in the Voltairian discussions, and Nicolardot's *Ménage et finances de Voltaire* appeared as a major contribution to the material written by the Veuillot group. Detailed writings in favor of Voltaire were published by E. Noël and P. Lanfrey, the latter's work being termed by Rigault as the anti-Nicolardot.

Arsène Houssaye, editor of *L'Artiste*, appeared in 1858 as

one of the outstanding continuers of Quinet and Michelet when he published *Le Roi Voltaire*. Reviews and commentaries of this work brought forth an alignment of admirers against adversaries of Voltaire, prolonging the debates that kept his name in public view. Discussions of books such as Houssaye's made prominent mention of collections of documents and letters which became more important to authors asserting their convictions. Publication of collections of letters, such as Cayrol's in 1856 and Foisset's in 1858, provided writers with documents to support both sides of the Voltaire argument.

The writings about Voltaire in the years 1859-1866 dealt for the most part with the details of Voltaire's life, and there was prevalent a further insistence upon the validity of documents consulted. Veuillot continued his attacks against Voltaire; Houssaye, along with writers for *Le Siècle* and *L'Artiste*, furnished answers to the attacks.

When a public statue was proposed by Louis Havin in 1867, again political importance was attached to Voltaire's name. The Church groups saw in such a move an attack against their prestige and answered accordingly. Pamphlets, articles, lectures, and books were inspired by the campaign of *Le Siècle* to raise the statue to Voltaire's memory. The most impressive work on the part of an anti-Voltairian to appear in 1867 was l'abbé Maynard's two-volume study of Voltaire. This book armed the opposition to the statue with an imposing array of statements, allegedly based on fact, to be offered in refutation of any claims made for Voltaire. Many articles and books were published in the same year as antidotes for the work of Maynard. Chief among these were the books of Pompery and Turpin de Sansay. In the same year Gustave Desnoiresterres began the publication of his series in which he presented the most ambitious study of Voltaire to date. His work was the result of scholarly interest detached from any contemporary political or religious quarrel. In 1870, when Voltaire's statue was finally erected in a public place in Paris, Desnoiresterres' work had reached the half-way mark in publication, and it was to have a pronounced influence on later

scholarly research on Voltaire.

While the major French issues of the period studied gave rise to extensive treatises on Voltaire, his name was brought to mind occasionally by events which had eighteenth-century parallels. Thus events in Poland recalled Voltaire's rôle in its partition, an occasional claim of miscarriage of justice rekindled an interest in Voltaire's fight for tolerance. In this last connection, Protestants, though usually not interested in furthering Voltaire's reputation, had occasion to discuss anew the Calas and Sirven cases. Writings by Charles and Athanase Coquerel, C. Rabaud, and others interested in furthering the Protestant cause brought forth rebuttals by Catholics, and Voltaire's name remained as a center of discussion.

During the period 1840-1870, many external events served as items of debate among Frenchmen. Moreover, in some instances, French diplomatic decisions helped foster strong feelings against foreign powers. For example, such events as the Pritchard affair, French intervention in the eastern Mediterranean and active participation in the Crimean and the Italo-Austrian wars, the reception of papal edicts during the Second Empire, caused violent clashes of opinion in France. When anti-English sentiment grew strong as a result of some of the events, it was natural that Voltaire, "discoverer" of England, should share the wrath directed against the English. Likewise other episodes which caused Frenchmen to take sides seemed to further the use of Voltaire's name as a symbol over which men argued.

Incidental mention of Voltaire's name also occurred in histories of the eighteenth century, in essays concerning other men of his era, and in literary discussions of private groups. In all such instances, the judgements relating to Voltaire followed the same pattern as the expressions found in works where Voltaire was the primary preoccupation and these opinions were often reflections of the general reputation of Voltaire.

Throughout the period studied, the name of Louis Veuillot

dominated the rabid anti-Voltairian group. The equally rabid defenders of Voltaire were led, in the early period, by Michelet and Quinet; later, the name of Arsène Houssaye was prominent among this group. Often in the Voltairian literature, claims of impartiality were made. Seldom did this claim hold true. The writers who dealt with Voltaire during the 1840's presented their picture of him in the manner in which they chose to see him. As was usual for this period, few displayed an interest in illustrating more than their personal points of view, and few were interested in proving the facts before accepting them. In the 1850's, obviously under the influence of Positivism, writers began to show a growing concern for stressing the reliability of the facts they used to substantiate their pronouncements relative to Voltaire. Authors became increasingly interested in the discovery and publication of Voltaire letters, and bibliographical data became more apparent. Throughout the 1860's, and especially for the last five years studied, documentary evidence came to have weighty importance. This added emphasis given to documentation did not necessarily produce uniformly objective studies of Voltaire, but authors' biases were displayed with greater regard for established data. The concern for careful scholarship reached its highest point with Desnoiresterres whose calm prose was remarkable among all the Voltairian literature written before the Franco-Prussian War. With such works as Maynard's on the one hand and Pompery's on the other, authors used the scholarly method in order to render prejudices ostensibly more valid. Even while some men were employing scholarly techniques, others still relied on eloquence in presenting attacks and counterattacks. Examples of this attitude are found in Veuillot's anti-Voltairian tirades and in Turpin de Sansay's unlimited praise of the Patriarch.

It is undoubtedly a tribute to the universality of Voltaire's talents and interests that virtually all writers and men of prominence recorded some judgment of Voltaire, even if, in some cases, this was done only in passing.

In observing the many writings about Voltaire, it became

apparent to us that men were mainly interested in his philosophy and in the events of his life. His artistry was usually a side issue that cropped up as incidental to the special cause of the quarrels; in a few rare instances, discussions of particular phases of Voltaire as a creative artist were presented by men completely disinterested in the political, philosophical, religious, and social disputes. Generally when men attacked or defended Voltaire's philosophy or his acts, for instance, his fight for tolerance, they did so in order to espouse or reject a symbol representing a nineteenth-century contemporary way of life. Hence, as issues changed continuously, the approach to Voltaire varied.

The reputation of Voltaire has continued to be discussed since 1870, and, as was true during the three decades we surveyed, contemporary events have seemed to stir up a heightened interest in what he was, in what he did, and in what he may represent. Polemicists have carried and are carrying on the debate, armed with an ever-increasing wealth of concrete facts and concerned more and more with basing their arguments on fact. There has been a greater interest in Voltaire as a literary artist, but, just as during the period 1840-1870, Voltaire's thought and acts remain as the chief focal point of examination.

VITA

George Louis Playe was born March 15, 1917 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. He attended the Pawtucket public schools, graduating from Pawtucket Senior High School in 1935. He received the A. B. degree *magna cum laude* with Final Highest Honors in French from Brown University in 1939. He was an assistant in French at Brown University and was granted the A. M. degree in 1940. He was an Irene V. Lichter Fellow at Washington University in 1940-1941. From September 1941 until November 1942, he was a University Fellow at the University of Illinois where he continued his studies in French and Spanish. For the next three years, he served in the Army of the United States and was assigned as a criminal investigator with the C. I. D. in Tunisia, Italy, and France. Discharged in 1946, he returned as a Fellow to the University of Illinois. Since September 1946, he has been Instructor in French and Italian in the College of the University of Chicago. He is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, Pi Delta Phi, Sigma Delta Pi, and the Rhode Island Honor Society. During his undergraduate and graduate studies in Romance Languages, he attended the courses of Professors Harcourt Brown, Dieckmann, Edwards, Fichter, Hamilton, Jacob, Jackson, Kellenberger, Morrissette, Nostrand, Peckham, Poggioli, Horatio Smith, Thénaud, Weinberg, Will, and Robert H. Williams. He wishes to express sincere thanks to Professor Joseph F. Jackson, under whose supervision this thesis was prepared.